

IMMUNOMODULATORY PEPTIDES

This application is a divisional of application Ser. No. 08/077,255, filed Jun. 15, 1993, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Ser. No. 07/925,460, filed Aug. 11, 1992 now abandoned.

The invention was made in the course of research funded in part by the U.S. Government under NIH Grant 5R35-CA47554; the U.S. Government therefore has certain rights in the invention.

The field of the invention is major histocompatibility complex (MHC) antigens.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Major histocompatibility complex (MHC) class II antigens are cell surface receptors that orchestrate all specific immune responses in vertebrates. Humans possess three distinct MHC class II isotypes: DR, for which approximately 70 different allotypes are known; DQ, for which 33 different allotypes are known; and DP, for which 47 different allotypes are known. Each individual bears two to four DR alleles, two DQ alleles, and two DP alleles.

MHC receptors (both class I and class II) participate in the obligate first step of immune recognition by binding small protein fragments (peptides) derived from pathogens or other non-host sources, and presenting these peptides to the regulatory cells (T cells) of the immune system. In the absence of MHC presentation, T cells are incapable of recognizing pathogenic material. Cells that express MHC class II receptors are termed antigen presenting cells (APC). APCs ingest pathogenic organisms and other foreign materials by enveloping them in endosomal vesicles, then subjecting them to enzymatic and chemical degradation. Foreign proteins which are ingested by APCs are partially degraded or "processed" to yield a mixture of peptides, some of which are bound by MHC class II molecules that are en route to the surface. Once on the cell surface, MHC-bound peptides are available for T cell recognition.

MHC class II antigens are expressed on the surface of APCs as a trimolecular complex composed of an α chain, a β chain, and a processed peptide. Like most polypeptides that are expressed on the cell surface, both α and β chains contain short signal sequences at their NH_2 termini which target them to the endoplasmic reticulum (ER). Within the ER the class II α/β chain complex associates with an additional protein termed the invariant chain (Ii). Association with Ii is proposed to block the premature acquisition of peptides (by blocking the peptide binding cleft of the MHC heterodimer), promote stable α/β interaction, and direct subsequent intracellular trafficking of the complex to endosomal vesicles. In the endosomes, Ii is removed by a process involving proteolysis; this exposes the peptide binding cleft, thus allowing peptides present in the endosome to bind to the MHC molecule. The class II/peptide complex is transported from the endosomes to the cell surface where it becomes accessible to T-cell recognition and subsequent activation of immune responses. Class II MHC molecules bind not only to peptides derived from exogenous (ingested) proteins, but also to those produced by degradation of endogenous (self) proteins. The amount of each species of peptide which binds class II is determined by its local concentration and its relative binding affinity for the given class II binding groove, with the various allotypes displaying different peptide-binding specificities.

Early during fetal development, the mammalian immune system is "tolerized", or taught not to react, to self-peptides.

The stability and maintenance of this system is critical for ensuring that an animal does not generate an immune response against self. A breakdown of this system gives rise to autoimmune conditions such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis. Current technologies intended to manipulate the immune system into reestablishing proper nonresponsiveness include protocols involving the intravenous delivery of synthetic, high affinity binding peptides as blocking peptides.

Vaccination can generate protective immunity against a pathogenic organism by stimulating an antibody-mediated and/or a T cell-mediated response. Most of the current vaccination strategies still use relatively crude preparations, such as attenuated or inactivated viruses. These vaccines often generate both antibody- and cell-mediated immunity, and do not allow one to modulate the type of immune response generated. Moreover, in many diseases the generation of the wrong type of response can result in an exacerbated disease state.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In the work disclosed herein, naturally processed peptides bound to six of the some 70 known human MHC class II DR allotypes (HLA-DR1, HLA-DR2, HLA-DR3, HLA-DR4, HLA-DR7, and HLA-DR8) have been characterized. These peptides were found to be predominantly derived from self proteins rather than foreign proteins. Several self peptide families have been identified with the unexpected property of degenerate binding: that is, a given self-peptide will bind to a number of HLA-DR allotypes. This observation runs counter to the widely-accepted view of MHC class II function, which dictates that each allotype binds a different set of peptides. Furthermore, many if not all of the self-peptides disclosed herein bind to the class II molecules with relatively high affinity. These three characteristics—(1) self rather than foreign, (2) degeneracy, and (3) high affinity binding—suggest a novel means for therapeutic intervention in disease conditions characterized by autoreactivity, such as Type I diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and multiple sclerosis. In addition, such therapy could be used to reduce transplant rejection.

In the therapeutic methods of the invention, short peptides modelled on the high-affinity immunomodulating self peptides of the invention (which preferably are nonallelically restricted) are introduced into the APCs of a patient. Tissue typing to determine the particular class II alleles expressed by the patient may be unnecessary, as the peptides of the invention are bound by multiple class II isotypes. It may be useful to employ a "cocktail" of peptides, where complete degeneracy is lacking for individual peptides, i.e., where peptides binds to fewer than all allotypes; the cocktail provides overlapping binding specificity. Once in the APC, a peptide binds to the class II molecules with high affinity, thereby blocking the binding of immunogenic peptides which are responsible for the immune reaction characteristic of the disease condition. Because the blocking peptides of the invention are self peptides with the exact carboxy and amino termini tolerized during ontogeny, they are immunologically inert and will not induce an immune response which may complicate treatment using non-self blocking peptides.

The peptides of the invention may be introduced into APCs directly, e.g., by intravenous injection of a solution containing one or more of the peptides. Alternatively, the APCs may be provided with a means of synthesizing large quantities of the blocking peptides intracellularly. Recom-